Approaches to Unintended Consequences in Singapore

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In his presentation, Professor David Chan shared his views on the various approaches to unintended consequences in Singapore. The following is a summary of the major points:

- An unintended consequence refers to the occurrence of a specific set of results, situation or state of affairs that was not the outcome intended by a purposeful action but was brought about by the action.

- Conventionally, unintended consequences are classified into three groups: positive unexpected benefit, unexpected drawback, and perverse result.

- Current narratives of unintended consequences should be revised because unintended consequences can be positive or negative and they can either help or hurt, are neither predetermined nor random, and can be anticipated or unanticipated, and the processes are as important as the outcomes.

- In policymaking, there are many unintended consequences that are not unanticipated. Policymakers plan and work to achieve intended consequences and avoid unintended consequences, and they make purposive choice among alternatives which often involve trade-off situations. The approach to consequences that are unintended but anticipated raises issues of justification, preparation and responsibility.

- It is important to understand the processes involved in unintended consequences relating policymakers' positions and practice as well as public's perspectives and perceptions. This means policymakers need to go beyond the notions of black swans, cognitive biases and whole-of-government approach to focus on perspective taking and trust building.